

Legislative Testimony of Manita Sharma

March 9, 2012

Judiciary Committee

Testimony in support of

HB 5388: An Act Concerning Court Fees And The Delivery Of Legal Services To The Poor

I grew up in India, where I lived until 2007. I had a cousin who was married to an Indian man, and they lived together in the United States. They convinced me that I should come and live with them, and that they would help me find a husband and establish a life in the United States as well. I was taken to the embassy in Bombay where I signed a lot of documents in preparation for the journey. When I left India in December of 2007 with my cousin's husband, I learned that they had just gotten a divorce and that I was to be his new wife. He showed me a marriage certificate with my signature on it, which I must have signed with all the other immigration papers. After he raped me, I knew I had no choice but to stay with him because I would be chastised were I to return to India.

My new husband, who was thirty years older than me, took me to Austria, where we lived for the next two years. He abused me physically, sexually, and verbally from the moment we arrived. I became pregnant with our daughter Divyana.

Finally, we moved to the United States in 2009. There, I was shocked to find out that my new husband and I would be sharing a house with my cousin, my husband's ex-wife. He immediately began treating her as his wife, and I slept on the couch and then in my own room with my young daughter. I was treated like a servant by both my cousin and my husband. They kept me isolated in the house, preventing me from making any outside contacts and only allowing me to call my family in India under their close observation. I suffered abuse from both my husband and my cousin, and my daughter witnessed a great deal of the violence.

In late 2009, my husband sent me alone to India, forcibly separating me from my seven-month-old daughter for eight months. When I returned, they treated me worse than ever. Worst of all, I realized that they were passing off my daughter as their own, taking her on family outings while I was forced to stay home. They even told the child's doctor and dance teacher that my cousin was her mother. This was extremely harmful to me emotionally. My husband and cousin kept me in a state of fear by threatening to take my daughter away from me.

I thought that I would never have a chance for happiness until I luckily made contact with a volunteer from a domestic violence shelter. After great trouble, I was finally able to leave my husband and make my way from a shelter and eventually into a rental room of my own. With the help of legal aid lawyers at New Haven Legal Assistance, I was able to get child support that allows me to care for my daughter and myself. Now the lawyers there are helping me fight my husband for custody of my daughter and to get a divorce. I am still afraid that he will try to take her from me, but having a lawyer makes me feel that I will be able to keep my daughter with me and live happily in peace.